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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR AF/W, AF/RSA, DRL AND INR/AA
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: Senegal Local Elections: Amateur Hour but Mostly Calm,
Free, and Fair

REF: Dakar 378

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On March 22, voters in Senegal's major cities voted in municipal, rural, and regional elections. Embassy Dakar deployed 13 monitoring teams in order to observe the elections. Post assesses that for the most part the elections were calm, free, and fair, but amateur in the way they were run. Almost every polling station in the country opened late and many did not have the required materials on hand. For the most part, those who wanted to vote were able to do so and it is striking to note that the majority of voters were women. There were no reports of attempts by the ruling party to block voters from going to the polls or to intimidate them into not going to the polls. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy deployed 13 observer teams covering multiple cities throughout the country. Four teams remained in Dakar covering the suburbs of Guediawaye, Pikine, Rufisque, Keur Massar, Yeuboul, Malika, Grand-Yoff, Parcelles, Camberene, Ann, Ouakam, and Yoff as well as in-city districts such as Plateau, Medina, Fann, Point-E, Amitie Guele Tape, Grand Dakar. Teams were also sent to Thies (covering Tivaouane), Kedougou, Touba (covering Mbacke and Diourbel), Mbour (covering Joal-Fadiouth), Kebemer (covering Louga), Kaolack (covering Fatik), Ziguinchor, (covering Oussouye), Matam (covering Ourosogui), and St Louis.

No Ballots, Late Starts

¶3. (SBU) Many polling stations throughout Senegal faced eerily similar problems, such as a lack of adequate material and poor training for the presidents of the voting centers (Note: Each polling station is managed by a team of three people: a President, a Secretary and an Assistant. End note). All thirteen teams reported that almost every polling station they visited, apart from the Franco-Arab School in the Point-E district of Dakar where President Abdoulaye Wade and his family voted (and were soundly beaten by the opposition) and a couple in Ziguinchor, started late. According to the Electoral Code, polls are supposed to open at 8:00 a.m. and close at 18:00. In most cases polls opened at around 9:00 a.m., although there were a number of extreme cases. Polls in the Pikine suburb of Dakar, an opposition bastion where President Wade's motorcade was stoned during a visit, did not open until 15:00 because the ballots had not been delivered, leading to accusations that the Government was actively engaging in voter suppression as a punishment for what the citizens did to the President. In the region of Kolda, a number of polls did not open until 19:00. As a result, those citizens in the affected polling stations will be re-voting on Saturday 28, 2009. In Mbour, a Socialist stronghold 70 kilometers south of Dakar, some bureaus waited to begin the vote until all the required material was delivered, but after an hour the presidents of the polling stations borrowed ballots from other bureaus to get started. In one instance, the president of a bureau tried to start the vote with one party's list missing and an angry voter broke both ballot boxes. The bureau received new boxes and got started around 10:00.

¶3. (SBU) Another major problem was the confusion surrounding the

ballots themselves and which party was competing in which election. This is because in this election voters were asked to vote twice, once to elect regional councilors and once to elect municipal and local councilors. Many polling stations were either missing the necessary documents that outline which party was competing in which of these two elections or the electoral team was unable to decipher what was a fairly complicated chart as some smaller parties opted to only compete on the regional level and not on the municipal level or vice versa. As a result, most observers reported that almost all of the voting offices they visited within the same polling station had a different number of ballots available for voters. Furthermore, it seems that the presidents were not briefed on how to deal with such problems and in some cases were reluctant to call the Prefects (a regional official that reports directly to the Minister of Interior and who is the highest ranking administrative authority in a given region) until pushed to do so by party representatives, thus causing further delays. In many instances, there were reports of missing materials such as ink or locks to secure the ballot boxes. For example, in a polling station in the Guediawaye suburb of Dakar, the president had used string to "lock" the boxes.

Few Observers, Some Police

14. (SBU) According to all reports by both observers and the media, there were no cases of election-related violence throughout the country. Each polling station had a small contingent of police and gendarmes who mostly kept to themselves once they had fulfilled their mission to guard the election materials. In many instances, police could be seen sitting together in a shaded area watching people vote. Emboff in Mbour reported that during the whole day his team met one observer from the human rights organization, RADDHO,

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who said he was local and was the only one covering the town. His overall impression was that there were no big problems. Similarly, PolCouns encountered only one representative of RADDHO during a full day of poll watching in the city of Ziguinchor in the Casamance region. To our knowledge, the only other countries to do any election observing were Canada, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, all of whom stayed in Dakar. In spite of some signs of potential violence in the lead-up to elections, there was none. Even in Ndindy in the Diourbel Region, one of the two rural communities where the late submission of election candidates to the National Electoral Committee had the potential of creating difficulties at the voting center (See REF), observers noted the presence of a large number of gendarmes with riot gear but they did not notice or hear of any difficulties at the center.

Comment

15. (SBU) While the turnout may have been fairly low, public interest in the results was high, especially as it began filtering out that the opposition had handed the ruling SOPI coalition and President Wade a major defeat. Many were peeking through the windows outside polling stations and standing with their cell phones at the ready waiting for result announcements. In Post's assessment, the election was mostly free and fair and went smoothly once the actually voting process was underway. End Comment.

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